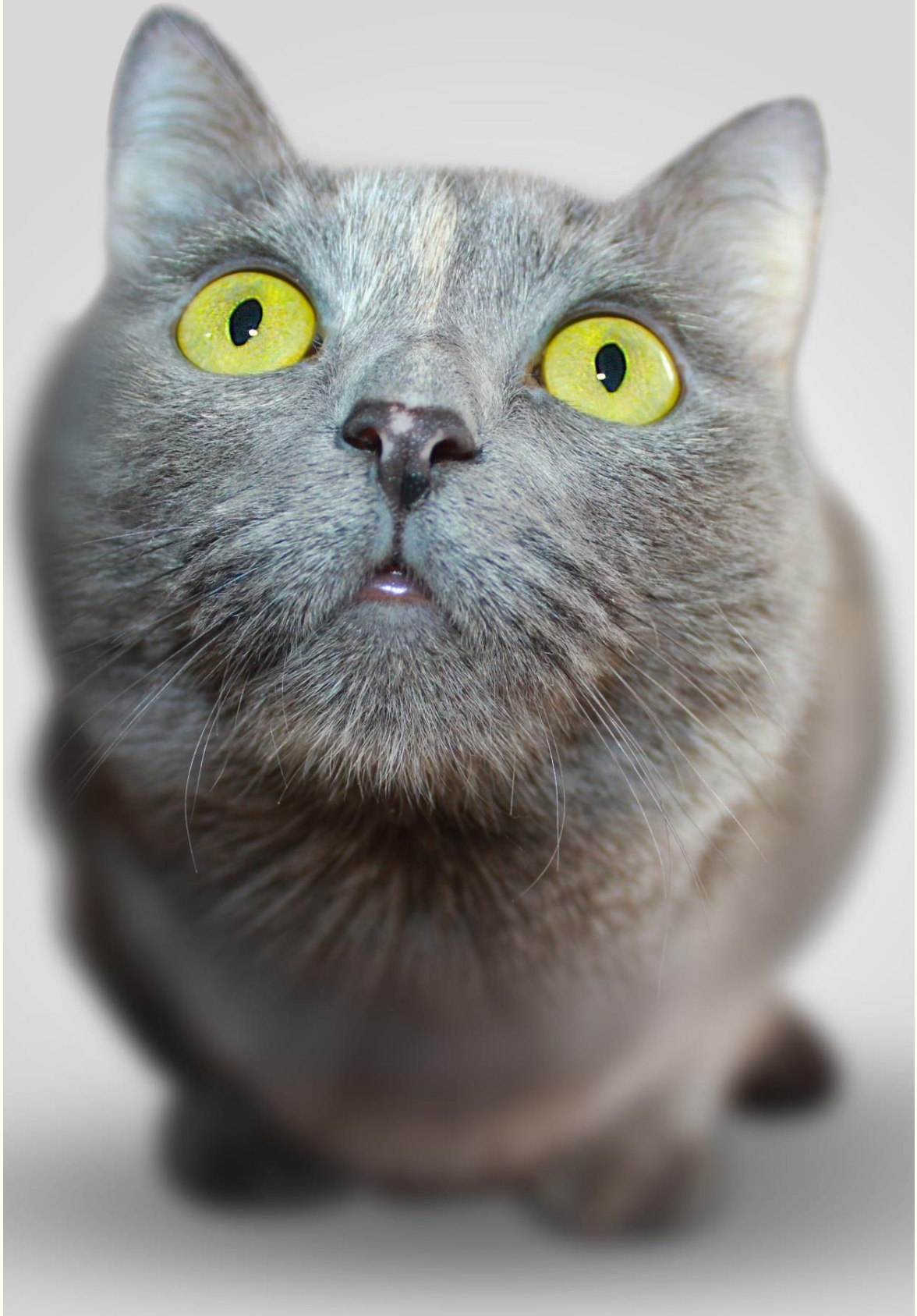


Idolatry and Zoolatry



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What is Idolatry?

By Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

THE TERM IDOLATRY, moreover, is of Christian origin. It was used by the early Nazarenes, during the 2½ centuries of our era, against those nations who used temples and churches, statues and images, because they, the early Christians themselves, *had neither temples, statues, nor images*, all of which they abhorred.¹

The outward form of idolatry is but a veil, concealing the one Truth like the veil of the Saitic Goddess. Only that truth, being for the few, escapes the majority. To [273] the pious profane, the veil recovers a celestial locality thickly peopled with divine beings, dwarfs and giants, good and wicked powers, all of whom are no better than human caricatures. Yet, while for the great majority the space behind the veil is really impenetrable — if it would but confess the real state of its mind — those, endowed with the “third eye” (the eye of Shiva), discern in the Cimmerian darkness and chaos a light in whose intense radiance all shape born of human conception disappears, leaving the all-informing divine Presence, to be felt — not seen; *sensed* — never expressed.

A charming allegory translated from an old Sanskrit manuscript illustrates this idea admirably:

Toward the close of the Pralaya (the intermediate period between two “creations” or evolutions of our phenomenal universe), the great IT, the One that rests in infinity and ever *is*, dropped its reflection, which expanded in limitless Space, and felt a desire to make itself cognizable by the creatures evolved from its shadow. The reflection assumed the shape of a Mahārāja (great King). Devising means for mankind to learn of his existence, the Mahārāja built of the qualities inherent in him a palace, in which he concealed himself, satisfied that people should perceive the outward form of his dwelling. But when they looked up to the place where stood the palace, whose one corner stretched into the right, and the other into the left infinitude — the little men *saw nothing*; the palace was mistaken by them for empty space, and being so vast remained invisible to their eyes. Then the Mahārāja resorted to another expedient. He determined to manifest himself to the little creatures whom he pitied — *not as a whole but only in his parts*. He destroyed the palace built by him from his manifesting qualities, brick by brick, and began throwing the bricks down upon the earth one after the other. Each brick was transformed into an idol, the red ones becoming Gods and the grey ones Goddesses; into these the Devatās and

¹ Blavatsky Collected Writings, (THE ROOTS OF RITUALISM) XI p. 66

Devatīs — the qualities and the attributes of the Unseen — entered and animated them. [274]

This allegory shows polytheism in its true light and that it rests on the One Unity, as does all the rest. Between the *Dii majores* and the *Dii minores* there is in reality no difference. The former are the direct, the latter the broken or refracted, rays of one and the same Luminary. What are Brahmā, Vishnu and Śiva, but the triple Ray that emanates directly from the Light of the World? The three Gods with their Goddesses are the three dual representations of Purusha the Spirit, and Prakriti — matter; the six are synthesized by Svāyambhuva the self-existent, unmanifested Deity. They are only the symbols personifying the Unseen Presence in every phenomenon of nature.¹

It is not the Philosophers, Sages, and Adepts of antiquity who can ever be charged with idolatry.

As is repeated many a time in this and other works, it is not the Philosophers, Sages, and Adepts of antiquity who can ever be charged with idolatry. It is they in fact, who, recognising divine unity, were the only ones, owing to their initiation into the mysteries of Esotericism, to understand correctly the *ὑπόνοια* (hyponoia), or under-meaning of the anthropomorphism of the so-called Angels, Gods, and spiritual Beings of every kind. Each, worshipping the one Divine Essence that pervades the whole world of Nature, revered, but never worshipped or idolised, any of these “Gods,” whether high or low — not even his own personal Deity, of which he was a Ray, and to whom he appealed.^{2, 3}

The Greek and the Latin Churches especially, are as idolatrous and pagan as any other religion.

Bossuet⁴ sees the cause of subsequent [to the Fourth Race] universal idolatry in the “original sin.” “Ye shall be as gods,” says the serpent of *Genesis* to Eve, thus laying the first germ of the worship of *false divinities*. Hence, he thinks, came idolatry, or the cult and adoration of *images*, of anthropomorphized or human figures. But, if it is the latter that idolatry is made to rest upon, then the two Churches, the Greek and the Latin especially, are as idolatrous and pagan as any other religion.⁵ It is only in the Fourth Race that men, who had lost all right to be considered divine, resorted to body worship, in other words to phallicism. Till then, they had been truly gods, as pure and as divine as their progenitors, and the expression of the allegorical serpent does not, as sufficiently shown in the preceding pages, refer at all to the physiological fall of men, but to their acquiring the knowledge of good and evil, which knowledge comes to them *prior* to their fall. It must not be forgotten that it is only after his

¹ Blavatsky *Collected Writings*, (FRAGMENTS – IDOLATRY) VII pp. 272-74

² This would be in one sense Self-worship.

³ *ibid.*, (SOME REASONS FOR SECRECY) XIV p. 50

⁴ *Elévations*, p. 56

⁵ And that, notwithstanding the formal prohibition at the great Church Council of Elvira in A.D. 303, when it was declared that “the form of God, which is immaterial and invisible, shall not be limited by figure or shape.” In 692, the council of Constantinople had similarly prohibited “to paint or represent Jesus *as a lamb*,” as also “to bow the knee in praying, as it is the act of idolatry.” But the council of Nicæa (787) brought this idolatry back, while that of Rome (883) excommunicated John, the Patriarch of Constantinople, for his showing himself a declared enemy of image worship.

forced expulsion from Eden that “Adam knew Eve his wife.”¹ It is not, however, by the dead-letter of the Hebrew Bible that we shall check the tenets of the *Secret Doctrine*; but point out, rather, the great similarities between the two in their esoteric meaning.²

Simplicius and Taylor on why did pagans deified dead men.

When the ineffable transcendency of the first God, which was considered as the grand principle in the Heathen theology, by its most ancient promulgators Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato, was forgotten, this oblivion was doubtless the principal cause of dead men being deified by the Pagans. Had they properly directed their attention to this transcendency they would have perceived it to be so immense as to surpass eternity, infinity, self-subsistence, and even essence itself, and that these in reality belong to those venerable natures which are as it were first unfolded into light from the unfathomable depths of that truly mystic unknown, about which all knowledge is refunded into ignorance. For as Simplicius justly observes,

It is requisite that he who ascends to the principle of things should investigate whether it is possible there can be anything better than the supposed principle; and if something more excellent is found, the same enquiry should again be made respecting that, till we arrive at the highest conceptions, than which we have no longer any more venerable. Nor should we stop in our ascent till we find this to be the case. For there is no occasion to fear that our progression will be through an unsubstantial void, by conceiving something about the first principles which is greater and more transcendent than their nature. For it is not possible for our conceptions to take such a mighty leap as to equal, and much less to pass beyond the dignity of the first principles of things.

He adds,

This therefore is one and the best extension [of the soul] to [the highest] God, and is as much as possible irreprehensible; *viz.* to know firmly, that by ascribing to him the most venerable excellencies we can conceive, and the most holy and primary names and things, we ascribe nothing to him which is suitable to his dignity. It is sufficient however, to procure our pardon [for the attempt] that we can attribute to him nothing superior.³

If it is not possible therefore to form any ideas equal to the dignity of the immediate progeny of the ineffable, *i.e.* of the first principles of things, how much less can our conceptions reach that thrice unknown darkness, in the reverential language of the

¹ Genesis iv, 1

² *Secret Doctrine*, II p. 279; [on Christendom being idolatrous]

³ Και χρη τον επι τας αρχας αναβαινοντα ζητειν, ει δυνατόν είναι τι κρειστον της υποτεθεισης αρχης καν ευρεθη, παλιν επι' εκεινου ζητειν, εως αν εις τας ακροτατας εννοιας ελθωμεν, ων ουκετι σεμνοτερες εχομεν· και μη σιγησαι την αναβαισιν. Ουδε γαρ ευλαβητεον μη κενεμβατωμεν, μειζονα τινα και υπερβαινοντα τας πρωτας αρχας περι αυτων εννοουσιντες. Ου γαρ δυνατόν τηλικουτον πηδημα πηδησαι τας ημετερας εννοιας, ως παρισωθηναι τη αξια των πρωτων αρχων, ου λεγω και υπερπηνηναι· μια γαρ αυτη προς θεον ανατασις αριστη, και ως δυνατόν απταιστος. Και ων εννοουμεν αγαθων τα σεμνοτατα, και αγιωτατα, και πρωτουργα, και ονοματα, και πραγματα αυτω ανατιθεντας ειδεναι βεβαιως, ότι μηδεν ανατεθεικαμεν αξιον· αρκει δε ημιν εις συγγνωμην, το μηδεν εχειν εκεινων υπερτερον. Simplic. in *Epict. Enchir.* p. 207, London 1670, 8vo.

Egyptians,¹ which is even beyond these? Had the Heathens therefore considered as they ought this transcendency of the supreme God, they would never have presumed to equalize the human with the divine nature, and consequently would never have worshipped men as Gods. Their theology, however, is not to be accused as the cause of this impiety, but their forgetfulness of the sublimest of its dogmas, and the confusion with which this oblivion was necessarily attended.²

¹ Of the first principle, says Damascius (in MS. *περι αρχου*) the Egyptians said nothing, but celebrated it as a darkness beyond all intellectual conception, a thrice unknown darkness, *πρωτην αρχην ανυμνηκασαν, σκοτος υπερ πασαν νοησιν, σκοτος αγνωστον, τρις τουτο επιφημιζοντες*.

² Taylor T (Tr. & Annot.). *Proclus' Theology of Plato*. (Vol. VIII of The Thomas Taylor Series) Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 1995; [Taylor's Introduction to *The Theology of Plato*, pp. 25-27]



Interior of the Pantheon in Rome by Giovanni Paolo Panin

What is Zoolatry?

By Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

WHY SHOULD ALL THE ANCIENT PEOPLE, who were no more fools than we are, have had such a superstitious dread of killing certain birds? In Egypt, he who killed an *ibis*, or the golden hawk — the symbol of the Sun and Osiris — risked and could hardly escape death. The veneration of some nations for birds was such that Zoroaster, in his precepts, forbids their slaughter as a heinous crime. We laugh in our age at every kind of divination. Yet why should so many generations have believed in divination by birds, and even in oömancy, said by Suidas to have been imparted by Orpheus, who taught how to perceive in the yoke and white of [263] the egg, under certain conditions, that which the bird born from it would have seen around it during its short life. This occult art, which demanded 3,000 years ago the greatest learning and the most abstruse mathematical calculations, has now fallen into the depths of degradation: it is old cooks and fortune-tellers who read their future to servant-girls in search of husbands, by means of the white of an egg in a glass.

Nevertheless, even Christians have to this day their sacred birds; for instance, the dove, the symbol of the Holy Ghost. Nor have they neglected the sacred animals. The *Evangelical* zoolatry — the Bull, the Eagle, the Lion, and the Angel (in reality the Cherub, or *Sārāph*, the fiery-winged Serpent) — is as much pagan as that of the Egyptians or the Chaldeans. These four animals are, in reality, the symbols of the four elements, and of the four *lower* principles in man. Nevertheless, they correspond physically and materially to the four constellations that form, so to speak, the *suite* or *cortège* of the Solar God, and occupy during the winter solstice the four cardinal points of the zodiacal circle. These four “animals” may be seen in many of the Roman Catholic New Testaments where the *portraits* of the evangelists are given. They are the animals of Ezekiel’s *Merkābāh*.¹

Theosophy rejects the Spencerian “He” and substitutes the impersonal IT for the personal pronoun, whenever speaking of the Absolute and the “Unknowable.” And it teaches, as foremost of all virtues, *altruism* and self-sacrifice, brotherhood and compassion for every living creature, without, for all that, worshipping Man or Humanity. In the Positivist, moreover, who admits of no immortal soul in men, believes in no future life or reincarnation, such a “worship” becomes worse than fetishism: it is *Zoolatry*, the worship of the animals. For that alone which constitutes the *real* Man is, in the words of Carlyle, “the essence of our being, the mystery in us that calls itself ‘I’

¹ *Secret Doctrine*, I pp. 362-63; [on the Egg-born Logoi]

... a breath of Heaven; the Highest Being reveals himself in man.” This denied, man is but an animal — “the shame and scandal of the Universe,” as Pascal puts it.¹

Sacred Cows are symbols of Creative Nature.

That Iō is identical allegorically with Isis and the moon is shown by her being “cow-horned.” The allegory undeniably reached Greece from India, where Vāch — “the melodious cow” (*Rig-Veda*) “from whom mankind was produced” (*Bhāgavata-Purāna*) is shown in the *Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa* as pursued by her father Brahmā, who was moved by an illicit passion, and changed her into a deer. Hence Iō, refusing to yield to Jupiter’s passion, becomes “horned.” The cow was in every country the symbol of the passive generative power of nature, Isis, Vāch, Venus — the mother of the prolific god of love, Cupid, but, at the same time, that of the *Logos* whose symbol became with the Egyptians and the Indians — the bull — as testified to by Apis and the Hindu bulls in the most ancient temples. In esoteric philosophy the cow is the symbol of creative nature, and the Bull (her calf) the spirit which vivifies her, or the “Holy Spirit,” as Mr. Kenealy shows. Hence the symbol of the horns. These were sacred also with the Jews, who placed near the altar horns of Shittim wood, by seizing which a criminal ensured his safety.²

Maximus Tyrius and Plutarch on statues and zoolatry.

The more mystical cause why the Egyptians worshipped animals, appears to me to be this, that they conceived a *living* to be preferable to an inanimate image of divinity. Hence, they revered animals as visible and living resemblances or certain invisible powers of the Gods. See Plutarch’s Treatise on *Isis and Osiris*.³

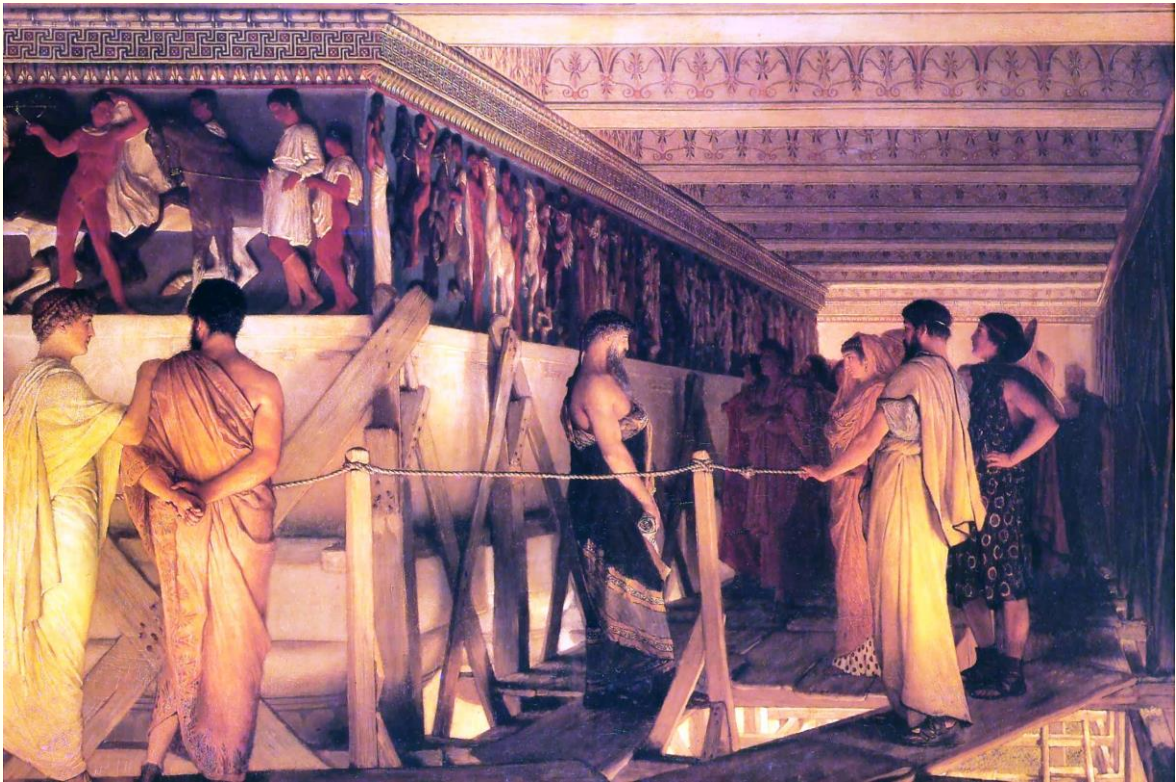
For divinity indeed, the father and fabricator of all things, is more ancient than the sun and the heavens, more excellent than time and eternity, and every flowing nature, and is a legislator without law, ineffable by voice, and invisible by the eyes. Not being able, however, to comprehend his essence, we apply for assistance to words and names, to animals, and figures of gold and ivory and silver, to plants and rivers, to the summits of mountains, and to streams of water; desiring indeed to understand his nature, but through imbecility calling him by the names of such things as appear to us to be beautiful. And in thus acting, we are affected in the same manner as lovers, who are delighted with surveying the images of the objects of their love, and with recollecting the lyre, the dart, and the seat of these, the circus in which they ran, and everything in short, which excites the memory of the beloved object. What then remains for me to investigate and determine respecting statues? only to admit the subsistence of deity. But if the art of Phidias excites the Greeks to the recollection of divinity, honour to animals the Egyptians, a river others, and fire others, I do

¹ Blavatsky *Collected Writings*, (THE BABEL OF MODERN THOUGHT) XIII p. 97

² *Secret Doctrine*, II p. 418 fn. [On Iō, the “cow-horned maid,” pioneer race of the Æthiopians, brought by her from the Indus to the Nile.]

³ Taylor T. (Tr. & Comm.). *Select Works of Porphyry: On the Abstinence from Animal Food*. (1st ed. 1823); Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 1999 (2nd ed.), p. 94 fn. by Taylor

not condemn the dissonance: let them only know, let them only love, let them only be mindful of the object they adore.¹



Phidias showing the frieze of the Parthenon to his friends (1868) by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

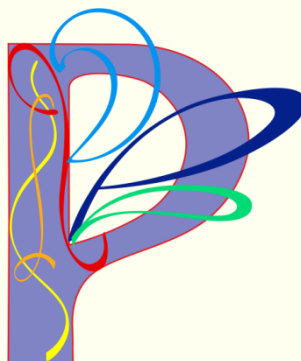
With respect to the worship of animals, Plutarch apologizes for it in the following excellent manner in his treatise *On Isis and Osiris*.

It now remains that we should speak of the utility of these animals to man, and of their symbolical meaning; some of them partaking of one of these only, but many of them of both. It is evident therefore that the Egyptians worshipped the ox, the sheep, and the ichneumon, on account of their use and benefit, as the Lemnians did larks, for discovering the eggs of caterpillars and breaking them; and the Thessalians storks, because, as their land produced abundance of serpents, the storks destroyed all of them as soon as they appeared. Hence also they enacted a law, that whoever killed a stork should be banished. But the Egyptians honoured the asp, the weasel, and the beetle, in consequence of observing in them certain dark resemblances of the power of the Gods, like that of the sun in drops of water. For at present, many believe and assert that the weasel engenders by the ear, and brings forth by the mouth, being thus an image of the generation of reason [or the productive principle of things.] But the genus of beetles has no female; and all the males emit their sperm into a spherical piece of earth, which they roll about thrusting it backwards with their hind feet, while they themselves move forward; just as the sun appears to revolve in a direction contrary to that of the heavens, in consequence of moving from west

¹ [Quoting Maximus Tyrius, *v.s.* — See my translation of his Dissertations, *Dissertat.* 38 (TTS Vol. VI, p. 309 *et. seq.*), the title of which is *Whether statues should be dedicated to the Gods.*]

to east. They also assimilated the asp to a star, as being exempt from old age, and performing its motions unassisted by organs with agility and ease. Nor was the crocodile honoured by them without a probable cause; but is said to have been considered by them as a resemblance of divinity, as being the only animal that is without a tongue. For the divine reason is unindigent of voice, and proceeding through a silent path, and accompanied with¹ justice, conducts mortal affairs according to it. They also say it is the only animal living in water that has the sight of its eyes covered with a thin and transparent film, which descends from his forehead, so that he sees without being seen, which is likewise the case with the first God. But in whatever place the female crocodile may lay her eggs, this may with certainty be concluded to be the boundary of the increase of the Nile. For not being able to lay their eggs in the water, and fearing to lay them far from it, they have such an accurate pre-sensation of futurity, that though they enjoy the benefit of the river in its access, during the time of their laying and hatching, yet they preserve their eggs dry and untouched by the water. They also lay sixty eggs, are the same number of days in hatching them, and those that are the longest lived among them, live just so many years; which number is the first of the measures employed by those who are conversant with the heavenly bodies.

Moreover, of those animals that were honoured for both reasons, we have before spoken of the dog. But the ibis, killing indeed all deadly reptiles, was the first that taught men the use of medical evacuation, in consequence of observing that she is after this manner washed and purified by herself. Those priests also, that are most attentive to the laws of sacred rites, when they consecrate water for lustration, fetch it from that place where the ibis had been drinking; for she will neither drink nor come near unwholesome or infected water; but with the distance of her feet from each other, and her bill she makes an equilateral triangle. Farther still, the variety and mixture of her black wings about the white represents the moon when she is gibbous.²



¹ Instead of *και δικης*, I read *και μετα δικης*.

² Taylor T. (Tr. & Annot.). *Proclus' Theology of Plato*. (Vol. VIII of The Thomas Taylor Series) Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 1995; [Taylor's Introduction to *The Theology of Plato*, pp. 30-32]

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